

Half a Chance

By FREDERIC S. ISHAM.

Author of "The Strollers," "Under the Rose," "The Lady of the Mount," Etc.

Copyright, 1909, by the Bobbs-Merrill Company.

(Continued.)

John Steele's heavy sick-rang hand. The way before him cleared. But close behind now, the others came fast. His door, however, was near. Now he reached it, flung the heavy key. Had it turned as usual the episode would have been brought to a speedy conclusion, but as it was the key stuck. The foremost of those who had been trailing fell upon Steele, but soon drew back. One of them, unable to repress a groan, held his hand to a broken wrist, while from his helpless fingers a knife dropped to the ground.

A ponderous, hulking fellow about six feet three, with a shock of red hair and a thick hanging lip, cursed loudly. Obviously this one of his assailants possessed immense, unusual strength.

"Let me at him, ye!" he cried in foul and harsh tones, when John Steele suddenly called him by name, said something in that selfsame dialect of pick-purses and their ilk. The ruffian paused, remained stock still.

"How the— Who?" the man began. "Call off your fellows!" John Steele's voice seemed to thrill. "I want to talk with you. It'll be more worth your while than any prizing or bagging you've ever yet done."

"Well, I'm blowed!" Suspicion gleamed from the bloodshot eyes. "And you want to talk with me? Here's a gamey cove!"

"I tell you I must talk with you! I've got a lay better than looking you for the dock. As for the others, they can go for all of me!"

"Oh, they can!" The big man's face expressed varying feelings—vague wonder. At the same time he began to edge cautiously away. "That would be a nice plant, wouldn't it? Let's out of this, blokes," suddenly. "This cove knows too much, and—"

"Wait!" Steele stepped forward. "I want you, Tom Rogers, and I'm going to have you. It'll be guids in your pocket and not Newgate."

"Slopes for it, mate?" The big man's voice rang out. Around the corner in the direction of the Thames the hazy figure of a policeman appeared in the dim light. "That's his little game!" and turned.

But John Steele sprang savagely forward. "You fool! You'll not get away so easily!" he exclaimed when one of the others put out a stick. It tripped him. John Steele's hand struck the curb violently.

For some moments he lay still; then he made out the face of a policeman bounding over him.

"That was a nasty fall you got, sir," said John Steele, arose, stood saying, "That man must not escape. Do you hear—must not?" As he spoke he made as if to rush forward. The other laid steady fingers on his arm.

"Hold hard a bit, sir," he said. "Not quibbling yourself. Besides, they're well out of sight now. No use running after."

Steele moved, grasped the railing leading up the front step. His brow thickened; a thousand darting pains shot through his brain. But for the moment these physical pangs were as nothing. Disappointment, self-reproach, moved him. To have allowed himself to go down like that—to have been caught by such a simple trick! Clumsy cove! And at a moment when—

"Pardon me, sir," the officer said in a bricker tone. "But hadn't we better go in? This, I take it, is your house. You can look after yourself somewhat and afterward describe your assailants; then we'll start out to find and arrest them, if possible."

Steele loosened his hold on the railing. He appeared now to have recovered his strength. "That's just what I don't want you to do. My name is John Steele. You know of me?" And as the other returned a respectful affirmative, "It is my desire to escape any notoriety in this little matter, you understand?" Something passed from his hand to the policeman's.

Walking quickly up the steps, John Steele opened the door, murmured a perfunctory "Good night" and let himself in. But as he mounted to his chambers some of the moment's exultation that had seized him at sight of the man revived.

"He has come back. He is here—in London, I surely can lay hands on him. I must! I will!"

CHAPTER IX.

A CHANGE OF FRONT.

HE found the task no easy one, however, although he went at it with his characteristic vigor and energy. Few men knew the sunny side of London better than John Steele—its darksome streets and foul alleys, its hovels and various habitations. And this knowledge he utilized to the best advantage, always to find that his efforts came to naught.

Reluctantly John Steele concluded that the man he sought had made his way out of London; otherwise the facilities at his command were such that

been able to attain his end—and find what he desired. Soberly attired, he attracted no very marked attention in the slums, breeding spots of the criminal classes. The denizens knew John Steele. He had been there oft before.

He had on occasion assisted some of them with storn good advice or more substantial services. He was acquainted with these men and women, had perhaps a larger charity for them than most people and it expedient to cherish. One man had seen the object of Steele's attitude and to this person, a wounded little "undesirable," the red-headed giant had confided that London was pretty hot and he thought of departing from it.

"After all this time that's gone by," he says to me, bitter like, "to think a man can't come back to his native 'ome without being spied on for what ought long ago to be dead and forgot?"

"What brought him to London?"

"I expect it was 'omesickness, sir." "E's been a bad lot, but 'e has a 'eart, arter all. It was to see 'is mother 'e came back; the old woman drew 'im 'ere. You see, 'e had written 'er from foreign parts, but could never 'ear 'cause she had moved. Used to keep a place where a woman was found—"

"Dead?"

"Murdered," said the man. John Steele was silent. "And she, 'is mother, 'ad gone, 'aving saved a bit, out into a peaceable-like little 'amlet, where there weren't no bobbies, only instead bits of flower gardens and bright bloomin' daffy-down-dillies. But, blime me, when Tom come and found out where she 'ad changed to if she 'adn't gone and shuffled off, and all 'e 'ad for 'is pains was the sight of a mound in the churchyard."

"Yes, she's buried," said John Steele thoughtfully. "And all she might have told about the woman who was murdered is buried with her."

"But she did tell, sir, at the time," "True," the visitor's tone changed. "If you can find Tom give him this note. You'll be well paid."

"I ain't askin' for that. You got me off easy once and gave me a lift arter I was let out—"

"Well, well!" Steele made a brusque gesture. "We all need a helping hand sometimes," he said, turning away.

And that was as near as he had come to attainment of his desire.

Summer passed. Sometimes, the better to think, to plan, to keep himself grided by constant exercise, he repaired to the park, now neglected by fashion and given over to that nebulous quantity of diverse qualities called the people.

"How do you do, Steele? Just the man I wanted to see?"

Near the main exit toward which John Steele had unconsciously stepped the sound of a familiar voice and the appearance of a well-known stocky form broke in with startling abruptness on the dark train of thought.

"Deep in some point of law?" went on Sir Charles. "You honor, believe you would have cut me. However, don't apologize; you're forgiven."

"Most amiable of you to say so, Sir Charles!" perfunctorily.

"Not at all! Especially as our meeting is quite apropos. Obligated to run up to town on a little matter of business; but, thank goodness, it's done. Never saw London more deserted. Dined at the club, nobody there. Supped at the hotel, dining room empty. Stroked up Piccadilly, not a soul to be seen. That is," he added, "one who whom one has seen before, which is the same thing. But how did you enjoy your trip to the continent?"

"It was not exactly a trip for pleasure," returned the other, with a slight accent of constraint.

"Ah, yes; so I understood. But fancy going to the continent on business! One usually goes for—well, reminds me, how would you like to go back into the country with me?"

"It is impossible at the moment for—"

But Sir Charles seemed not to listen. "Dined dull journey for a man to take alone, good deal of it by coach. You'll find a few saloons to kill, trout and all that. Think of the joy of whipping a stream after having been mewed up all these months in the musty metropolis. Besides, I made a wager with Jocelyn you wouldn't refuse a second opportunity to bark in Arcadia." He laughed. "I really couldn't presume to ask him again, in the way she expressed it, but if you can draw a sufficiently eloquent picture of the rural attractions of Dorsetshire to woo him from his beloved dusty byways you have my permission to try."

"Did she say that?" John Steele spoke quickly, then, "I am sorry it is impossible, but," in a low tone, "how is Miss Wray?"

"Never better. Enjoying every moment. Jolly party all that. Lord Ronald and— Here Sir Charles enumerated a number of people.

"Lord Ronald is there?"

"Yes; couldn't keep him away from Strathorn House now," he laughed. "As a matter of fact, he has asked my permission to— There!" Sir Charles stopped, then laughed again with a little embarrassment. "I've nearly let the cat out of the bag."

John Steele spoke no word. His face was set, immovable.

"You mean he has proposed for her hand, and she—Steele seemed to speak with difficulty—"has consented?"

"Well, not exactly. She appears complainant, as it were," he answered. "But, really, I shouldn't have mentioned the matter at all. Quite premature, you understand? Let's say no more about it. And—what was it you said about going back with me?"

"Yes," said John Steele, with a sudden strength and energy that Sir Charles might attribute to the desire to make himself understood above the

din of the street. "I'll go back with you at—the latter words, lower spoken, the other did not catch—"no matter what cost!"

Sir Charles and John Steele arrived at Strathorn. This little hamlet lay in a sleepy looking dell. As the driver swung down a hill he whipped up his horses and literally charged upon the town, swept through the main thoroughfare and drew up with a flourish before the principal tavern. Sir Charles started and stretched his legs. John Steele got down.

"Strathorn House," he said to Sir Charles. "Is near. I am in the mood for exercise after sitting so long and should like to walk there."

"By all means," returned the other, "since it's your preference. Pretty apt to overtake you," he went on, after giving his guest a few directions, "especially if you linger over any points of interest."

The trap which had been sent for drew up, and the two men separated. Sir Charles rattled briskly down one way, Steele turned to go the other.

Soon rose before him the top of a modest steeple, then a church, within the sanctuary of whose yard old stones mingled with new. He stepped in. "Straight on across the churchyard," had been Sir Charles' direction. John Steele moved quickly down the narrow path.

Strathorn House! A noble dwelling, massive and gray. And yet one that lifted itself with charming lightness from its solid, baronial-like foundation. It adorned the spot, merged into the landscape. Behind, the forest, a dark line, pencilled itself against the blue horizon. Before the ancient stone pile lay a noble park.

Long the man looked. Through a faint veil of mist turret and tower quivered, strong lines of masonry vibrated. Wavering as in the spell of an optical illusion, the structure might have seemed but a fragment of imagination or one of those fanciful castles sung by the Elizabethan brotherhood of poets. Did the image occur to John Steele? Did he feel for the time, despite other disquieting, extraneous thoughts, the subtle enchantment of the scene? The minutes passed. He did not move.

"You find it to your liking?"

A voice, fresh, gay, interrupted. With a great start, he turned.

Jocelyn Wray, for it was she, laughed; so absorbed had he been, he had not heard her light footstep on the grass behind.

His face changing, "Entirely," he managed to say. And then, "I did not know you were near."

"Not? But I could see that, Confess," with accent a little derisive, "I startled you."

She looked at him curiously. "Shall we walk on toward the house? I went down into the town thinking to meet my uncle," she explained, "but as I had a few errands, on account of a children's fete we are planning, reached the tavern after he had gone."

She stepped into the path leading from the churchyard; it was narrow, and she walked before him.

"The others went hunting," she said. She stepped quickly from the byway into the main road. "There it is," she said, pointing with a small white finger.

He moved now at her side. At the entrance, broad, imposing, she paused. A thousand perfumes seemed wafted from the garden; the rustling of myriad wings fell on the senses like faint cadences of music.

Within the stately house, near a recessed window at the front, a man stood at that moment reading a letter; shall be down to see you soon. Case coming on; links nearly all complete. Involve a new and bewildering possibility. Have discovered the purpose of S's visit to the continent. It was—

Lord Ronald perused the words expectantly.

"So that was it," he said to himself slowly. "I might have known!"

Voices without caught his attention; he glanced quickly through the window. Jocelyn Wray and John Steele were walking up the marble steps.

CHAPTER X.

A CONTENT.

FEW days passed. The usual round of pastimes inseparable from house parties served to while away the hours. Other guests arrived, one or two went. Lord Ronald had greeted John Steele perfunctorily; the other's manner was likewise mechanically courteous. It could not very well have been otherwise; a number of people were near.

A rainy spell put a stop to outdoor diversions. The second morning of the dark weather discovered two of the guests in the oak paneled smoking room of Strathorn House.

"Believe I shall run over to Germany very soon, Steele," said Forsythe to the lawyer.

"Indeed?"

"Yes; capital case coming on in the criminal courts there."

"And you don't want to miss it, Forsythe?"

"Not I! Weakness of mine, as you know. Most people look to novels or plays for entertainment; I find mine in the real drama, unfolded every day in the courts of justice."

John Steele watched a young lad approach outside. He waved a paper in his hand and called with easy familiarity to a housemaid in an open window above:

"Telegram from London, miss."

The silence that followed was again broken by Captain Forsythe's voice: "There are one or two features in this German affair that remind me of another case some years back—one of our own—that interested me."

"Ah?" The listener's tone was only politely interrogatory.

"A case in London—perhaps you have heard of it? The murder of a

woman, once well known before the footlights, by a one-time champion of the ring—the Prince of Peck, I think he was called. I once puzzled a bit over that one, investigated it somewhat on my own account, don't you know?"

"In what way?" Steele's manner was no longer indifferent.

"Then it attracted you, too, as an investigator?" murmured the captain in a gratified tone. "For your book, perhaps?"

"Not exactly. But you haven't yet told me, in a few, short ones, why you looked into it on your own account. It seems simple, obvious."

"That is just it," said Captain Forsythe, frowning. "It was perhaps a little too simple, too obvious."

"You attended the trial of this fellow?"

"The last part of it wasn't in England when it first came on, and what I heard of it raised some questions and doubts in my mind. However, I didn't think much more about the case until a good many months later, when chance alone drew my attention more closely to it. Was down in the country, when one night I happened to get on this almost forgotten case of the Prince of Peck, whereupon the landlord of the inn where I put up informed me that one of the villagers in this identical little town had been landed at the place where the affair occurred."

"The woman who testified no one had been to her place that night except—"

"John Steele spoke sharply. "This fellow? Quite so," Captain Forsythe walked up and down. "Now,

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"The latter's face remained impassive."

"A little contest with the fells, a fencing bout! Good!" exclaimed Forsythe.

Jocelyn Wray walked over to the group, and Forsythe followed.

"Bravo, Ronald!" A number of people applauded.

"He has won. Now the reward! What is it to be?"

"Not so fast! Here are others."

"True," Ronald looked around with his cold smile. His glance vaguely included John Steele and Captain Forsythe.

"Count me out," laughed the latter. "Not in my line, don't you know, since I joined the retired list."

"However, there's Steele," Sir Charles, pipe in hand, remarked.

"Do you use the fells, Mr. Steele?" asked Jocelyn Wray.

He moved forward. Lord Ronald stood near her, bending over with a slightly proprietary air.

"I—" Steele looked at them. "Only a little."

"Then you must try conclusions with Lord Ronald!" called out Sir Charles. "As victor over the rest he must meet all comers."

"Nothing to be put out by being beaten by Ronald," interposed an observer. "Had the reputation of being one of the best swordsmen on the continent; has even had, I believe, with a laugh, 'one or two little affairs of honor.'"

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

"Honor!" Steele's glance swung around, played brightly on the nobleman.

Jocelyn Wray toward the window. Across the room a footman now approached Lord Ronald and extended a salver.

John Steele's glance flashed toward Ronald. The telegram, then, had been for— He saw an inscrutable smile cross the nobleman's face.

A door closed quietly as Lord Ronald went out.

The afternoon of that same day there arrived at the village of Strathorn from London a discreet looking little man who, descending at the Golden Lion, was shown to a private sitting room on the second story. In about an hour he was joined by Lord Ronald.

"Well," he spoke quickly, "I fancy you have a little something to tell me, Mr. Gillett?"

"A little something?" The latter rubbed his hands. "More than a little! The special inquiry which your lordship mentioned just as he was leaving my office proved for a time most illusive."

"You mean the object of John Steele's visit to the continent?"

"Exactly. And, the object of that visit solved, I have now a matter of greatest importance to communicate, so important it could only be imparted by word of mouth." The police agent spoke hastily and moved nearer.

"Indeed! You have reached a conclusion, one that you sought to reject perhaps, but that wouldn't be discarded?"

Mr. Gillett looked at him earnestly. "You don't mean—it isn't possible that you knew all the while?"

"Let us start at the beginning."

"True, your lordship," Mr. Gillett swallowed. "As your lordship is aware, we were fortunate enough in the beginning to find out through our agent in Tasmania that John Steele came to that place in a little trading schooner, the Laura Deane of Portmouthe; that he had been rescued from a tiny anchored reef, or life, on Dec. 21, some three years before. The spot, by longitude and latitude, marks, through an odd coincidence, the place where the Laura Nelson met her fate."

"A coincidence truly," murmured the nobleman. "But at this stage in your reasoning you recalled that all on board were embarked in the ship's boats and reached civilization, except possibly—"

"A few of my charges between decks? A bad lot of truly brutes. The story of John Steele's rescue," went on Mr. Gillett, "was told by himself, was well known in Tasmania. A lawyer by profession, he had been passenger on a merchant vessel, the Mary Vane of Baltimore, United States. This vessel, like the Laura Nelson, had come to grief. All of those in John Steele's boat had perished except him. Some had gone mad through thirst and suffering. Others had killed their fellows in a frenzy. Being of superb physique, having been through much physical training—the listener stirred in his chair—he managed to